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UNCLAS MANAMA 000756

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR DS/IP/NEA, DS/ITA, DSERCC, DS/ATA

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PTER](#)

SUBJECT: BAHRAINI SHI'A DEMONSTRATION TURNS VIOLENT -- YET AGAIN

REF: MANAMA 00750

1. By Wednesday, 05/19/04, Post had anticipated a large demonstration in Bahrain for Friday, 05/21/04. Our projection was based on calls by Hassan Nasrallah and Ayatollah Ali Sistani for Shi'a to rise up and demand the withdraw of U.S. forces from Karbala and Najaf. Multiple Embassy contacts corroborated our information that Bahraini Shi'a planned to demonstrate, adding that many intended to wear symbolic white "death shrouds," an ominous gesture. As noted in RefTel, Post issued a warden message on 05/19/04 that warned Americans of the potential disturbances.

2. As expected, at 1600 on Friday, 05/21/04 following afternoon prayers, a large crowd began to gather in the Seef district of Bahrain (approx. 6km from the Embassy). Several eyewitnesses reported to RSO that some of the individuals appeared to be carrying "sticks and rocks." The stated intention of the demonstration's organizers, the Islamic Enlightenment Society and the Al Wefaq National Islamic Society, was to march peacefully along a simple circular route.

3. By 1615, the number of protesters quickly swelled to around 4,000 - 5,000. What happened next is somewhat nebulous because the police closed all streets approaching the demonstration area. From our understanding of reports from multiple sources, GOB riot police stopped the protesters from continuing along their desired route. This stoppage incited the crowd to violence including rock throwing. By 1630, RSO received the first reports of tear gas launches. As the main body of the crowd began to flee from the gas, a senior Shi'a leader and march organizer, Shaikh Isa Qassim, was reportedly knocked down and injured.

4. Shaikh Isa Qassim's injury apparently incited the crowd to higher levels of violence. By 1700, the momentum had shifted to the protesters, who charged and dispersed the riot police. Moments later, RSO received reports that a group of hooligans had commandeered a police vehicle (Land Rover Defender), overturned it, and set it afire. Chaos and violence followed for the next thirty minutes until the riot police regrouped at around 1730. Additionally at 1730, Al Wefaq leader, Shaikh Ali Salman, addressed the frenzied crowd and called for control and an end to the violence. Between the riot police re-deployment and Shaikh Ali Salman's appeals, the violence subsided and calm was restored by 1800.

5. On Saturday, 05/22/04, local newspapers were reporting 13 people injured during the demonstration. One daily printed a photograph of flag-waving youths rejoicing next to the burning police vehicle. King Hamad was quoted as saying he was "not pleased" with the violence. At no time was the U.S. Embassy approached or targeted by this group of protesters.

6. COMMENT: Post is not at all surprised by the violence that erupted at this demonstration. As we have seen during the last several planned "peaceful" marches, there is consistently an element in these crowds intent on engaging the police and inciting violence. RSO believes that trouble-makers from previous demonstrations are neither detained beyond a few days nor punished beyond a nominal BD 50,000 fine (about USD \$133.00). This apparent lack of punishment has encouraged repeat offenses. Also, Post harbors genuine concern about potential future demonstrations. When influential Shiite leaders call for action, the Bahraini Shi'a majority (approx. 80 per cent) feel obligated to comply. END COMMENT.
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